

## Farmer Jan featuring film star Brad

### A cognitive socio-onomastic take on English first name stereotypes in Flanders

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**Background** | This paper combines socio-onomastics and cognitive sociolinguistics to investigate the mental associations between first names and their bearers. Socio-onomastics studies how these names function as vehicles for sociolinguistic information, susceptible for stereotype formation (Van Langendonck 2002). For instance, Dunkling (1977) connects Mary to being “quiet” and Richard to being “good-looking”. Additionally, Mehrabian (2001) found significant perceptual differences in ratings of “success in life” for first names like Lauren/Alexander (high success) versus Bertha/Skipp (low success). Adopting a cognitive-sociolinguistic perspective, the question becomes which mental processes underlie these stereotypical naming patterns.

**Aim** | In a bid to address this question, this paper adopts a developmental perspective, verifying whether and how children’s increasing exposure to the links between names (language) and the social characteristics of their bearers (world), allows them to schematize these patterns, creating stereotypical shortcuts in the mind (Kristiansen 2010):

RQ1. (As of when) Do children draw on first name stereotypes?

RQ2. How can we explain the absence/presence of these stereotypical naming patterns?

The naming pattern under scrutiny is that of Dutch vs. English-inspired first names in Flanders, where English first names are amongst others stereotypically linked to trendiness (Bloothoof & Onland 2011).

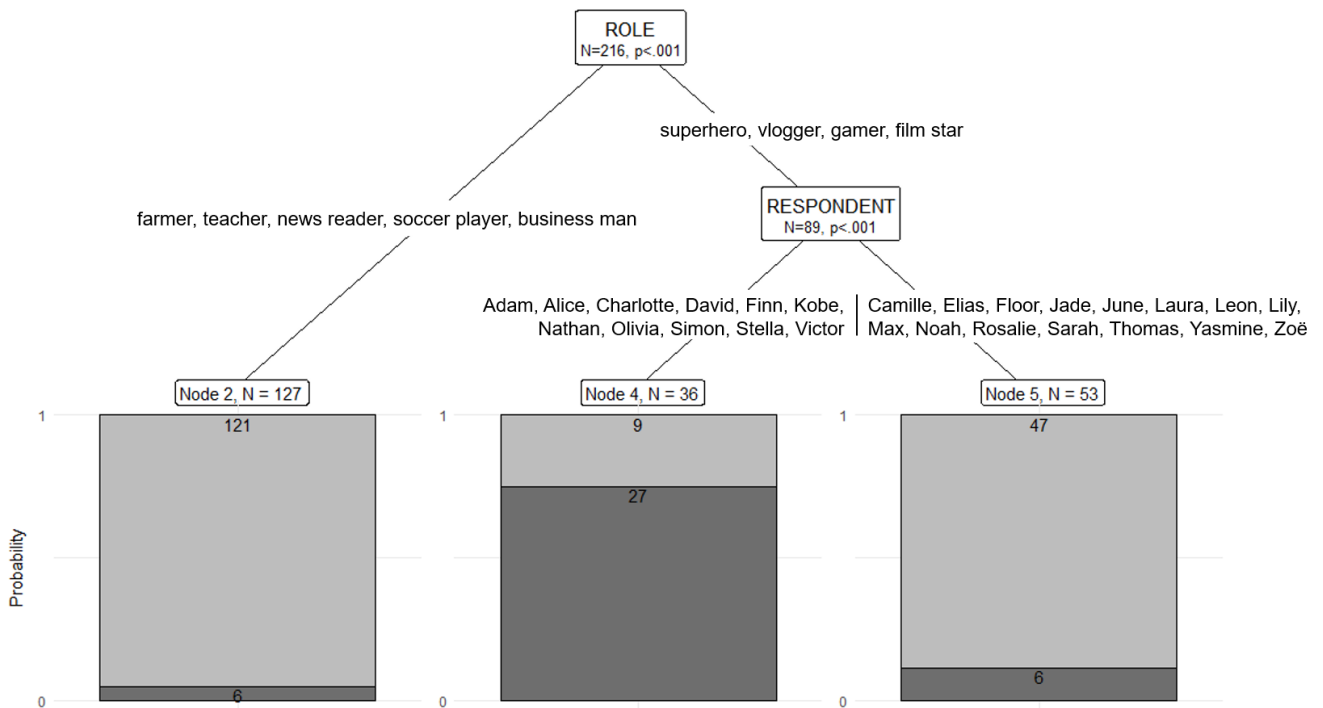
**Methodology** | This paper relies on two subtasks of a larger roleplay elicitation project involving 26 Belgian Dutch-speaking preadolescents (6-13 y/o):

**Naming task** Respondents are asked to choose a new first name for themselves when performing 6 English-oriented roles (e.g. gamer, film star) and 3 Dutch-oriented roles (e.g. farmer, teacher) (see Schuring et al. 2023). The corpus consists of 216 names produced by the 26 respondents attributed to 9 social roles. English-inspired names are identified using Onysko (2007)’s grapheme-phoneme mapping rule. Regression trees are implemented to uncover naming patterns and age effects.

**Interview** At T+3 months, respondents are asked if they remember the names they chose (recall) and are requested to explain their name choice (motivation). The motivations for adopting a specific name are identified in the resulting corpus (3 hours of data) through qualitative thematic analysis.

**Results** | As concerns RQ1, our findings indicate two groups of respondents: those who rely on the stereotypical naming patterns, selecting English names for English-oriented roles, and those who do not (see Figure 1). Age does not contribute to explaining the variation. As concerns RQ2, the follow-up interviews point to three major motivations for choosing a particular name, indicative of both bottom-up and top-down stereotype-acquisition processes (Drager & Kirtley 2016): first thought answers, exemplar-based answers (“I know a gamer with that name”) and direct references to the stereotype (“gamers have English names”). These answers are linked up with variation in recall.

**Implications** | As such, although further investigation is needed on the impact of celebrity name bearers (Zenner & Marzo 2015) and within-subject variation between the two tasks, this paper shows the promise of combining socio-onomastics and cognitive sociolinguistics to model stereotype formation of first names.



**Figure 1:** conditional inference tree for first name choices with English-inspired names in dark gray and Dutch + other names in light gray. The age parameter was not retained by the model.

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